

ICT and the Transformation of Political Communication

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Abstract

Nowadays, political parties face a crisis of participation. They used to behave as channels for political communication, but expectation on participation in political parties is dropping in long-established democracies. As a result, parliamentarians are pinning their communication hopes on new information and communication technologies (ICTs). This paper looks into parliamentary websites, at cross-national survey on responses of parliamentarians about their email use, and national Internet connectivity data to show that although political parties were quick to adopt ICTs for political communication, poor implementation of ICTs has led to mixed results. For successful political communication through ICTs, we suggest parliaments should establish strategic goals for ICTs, alongside ICT training and education for parliamentarians.

Keywords

Information and Communication Technologies; Parliamentarians; Communication Channel; Internet Literacy; Communications Strategy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explain why parliaments have embraced ICTs (information and communications technologies) as a possible solution for their communications needs, and to assess whether, and to what extent, ICTs solved the problems for which they were implemented. We argue that, while parliaments adopted ICTs to improve their communications with citizens, to receive more input from the public, and to increase accountability for parliamentary actions, the success of the ICT strategy has been mixed. In some settings, ICTs enabled parliaments and parliamentarians to improve their communications with the electorate, and in other settings, they failed to do so. The problems stemmed from parliamentary websites that

provided incomplete, inaccurate or outdated information, or unreliable parliamentary contact information. A related problem was due to the fact that even when parliamentary websites were displaying Parliamentarians' correct email address, some MPs did not use this institutional email, either because they did not know they had an institutional email, or because they lacked computer literacy – they did not know how to operate an email effectively. These are problems stemming from the elites—from parliamentarians and parliament—but an additional problem was seen at the citizen level. In several countries, especially in the under-developed world, citizens have limited access to ICTs. Hence, even if the parliamentary websites were efficiently managed by the webmaster, even if the websites provided parliamentarians' correct email addresses, and even if parliamentarians used these institutional email addresses, citizens may not have the knowledge or the technology to email MPs.

Acknowledging that parliamentary communications through ICTs will only work if citizens and parliamentarians have access to necessary technology and skills, in this paper we suggest how technology and skills should be made available to parliaments, parliamentarians, and parliamentary staff. In doing so, we suggest devising a proper strategic plan, and providing proper training.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section we explain why parliaments are searching for new channels, and new ways to communicate with citizens. In this regard, we suggest that political parties once played a communications linkage function between parliament and citizens, allowing for top-down and bottom-up information sharing of information. However, the crisis of political parties encounters has left parties unable to link citizens and parliaments, leaving parliaments trying to find new

means of communication with the electorate.

In the second section, we argue that worldwide, parliaments thought they had found a solution to their communication needs in ICT. We argue that this belief led parliaments to rapidly embrace ICTs as the solution to their communication problems and needs. However, in this section we note that the rapid adoption of the new communications technologies has not always led to their effective use. In essence, we argue that the adoption of ICTs has not always led to improvements in communications between parliament and the electorate. To argue this point, we used data gathered in a cross-national survey, and we were able to show that the speed with which parliamentary websites and emails were set up was not matched by corresponding level of precision and accuracy. Some of these websites provided incomplete, inaccurate, and outdated information. In other cases, they did not provide parliamentarians' correct contact information, or contact information for members of parliament. These websites were set up, but not properly, which did little to improve communications between citizens and parliamentarians. Furthermore, the data collected in the course of this cross-national survey also reveals that MPs have not always made the most efficient use of these new communications tools. As a result, the evidence discussed in this section favors the claim that in spite of the fact that parliaments had adopted ICT to improve communications between parliamentarians and the citizens, parliamentarians are excluded from approach, and there was no improvement in the communication.

Based on this evidence, in the third section we formulate some suggestions as to how some of these problems can be addressed, and how communications can be improved. Specifically we suggest that parliaments must adopt proper strategic plans to develop, adopt, and adapt ICTs to their needs, and that in order to do so in the best possible way, they could benefit from proper and ongoing training. In the fourth and final section we draw some tentative conclusions.

Section One: The Need for New Channels of Communication

In the course of the third wave of democratization (Huntington, Samuel 1991), democracy has spread to countries and regions that traditionally had little democratic history, and in there, democracy assumed specific qualities that induced some scholars to state

that democracy was becoming indigenized or adaptive to local circumstances. Meanwhile democracy was also changing in countries where it had long existed (Dressel, Bjoem, Leopardo Morlino & Riccardo Pelizzo 2011).

The transformation of long-established democracies displays a variety of features, three of which seem to be particularly relevant to our present purposes. First of all, comparative data make it quite clear that some of the democratic institutions are in the midst of a crisis, taking the case of political parties and parliaments for example.

The crisis of parliaments is evidenced by the fairly low level of trust that parliaments enjoy in long-established democracies. The data collected in the most recent wave of the World Value Survey indicates that less than one-third of citizens in long-established democracies has confidence in parliament. The percentage of respondents indicating that they have a great deal, or quite a lot of confidence in parliament is displayed in TABLE 1.

The data show that in long established democracies, only a minority of citizens has confidence in parliament. The German and the US data are particularly striking, for they show that nearly eight citizens out of ten have no confidence in parliament/congress.

Parliaments enjoy equally low levels of confidence in Eastern Europe, and Latin America, whereas they enjoy fairly high levels of confidence in the Scandinavian countries, in Africa, and in some Mediterranean countries (Spain and Turkey).

TABLE 1 CONFIDENCE IN PARLIAMENT (%)

Country	Confidence in parliament (in per cent)
Australia	34.1
Canada	38.6
France	35.5
Germany	21.9
Great Britain	36.2
Italy	33
The Netherlands	29.7
New Zealand	34.6
USA	20.6

Source: World Value Survey

If survey data analysts, working in the political

culture tradition, are correct in stating that low confidence in an institution indicates that it has little legitimacy, and if legitimacy is the single most important factor for the proper functioning of democracy (Lipset, Seymour Martin 1959), then it is clear why the legitimacy crisis of parliaments and legislatures has led observers to suggest that we are witnessing a crisis of parliamentary democracy.

The crisis of parliaments goes hand in hand with the crisis of political parties and could possibly be caused by it. In the past few decades, the scholarly literature has paid considerable attention to the crisis of political parties.¹

Political scientists (and constitutional lawyers) have almost unanimously acknowledged that parties are increasingly unable to perform their traditional functions (Parebianco, Angelo 1982). They have witnessed the changes taking place in the party organizations whose party members and the voters percentage has declined, and the strengthening believe on the disability of political parties to perform their traditional tasks, which leads to the emergence of an anti-party system if parties. It is generally acknowledged that political parties are no longer able to integrate the masses into the political

system, to express and represent societal needs and demands, to articulate them into coherent political programs, to mobilize voters, to select sufficiently skilled political personnel and, as some scholars have observed, to govern (Pasquino, Gianfranco 1980).

Scholars have alternatively identified the signs, symptoms, and the definitive proof of this party crisis in the growing detachment between parties and society, in the emergence of new social movements, in the increasing importance of interest groups in the political arena, and in the transformation of party systems (Lawon, Kay and Peter Merkl, eds. 1988).

However, in spite of the wide agreement that there is a party crisis, it is still not clear what this crisis exactly is, and why parties have fallen into it. In this respect, Daalder noted that there are three main streams of party crisis arguments (Daadler, Hans 1992). The first argument suggests that political parties have become anachronistic, obsolete, and therefore superfluous, because they have completed their historically unique task of integrating new groups of citizens into the political system. Now, there are no un-represented or under-represented social groups that need to be integrated in the system. Parties fail to perform their traditional function because they have no function to perform. The second group of arguments suggests instead, that parties are in crisis because they "fell increasingly under the working of market forces" so that "in the process they came to resemble one another (...) losing their virtue with their specificity". The third group of interpretations holds the view that the crisis of parties is due to the fact that political systems and processes have changed in such a way that parties are no longer the key actors in the political system (Daadler, Hans 1992).

Note, however, that not all the explanations for the crisis of parties can be grouped into these three categories. In contrast to those who believe that the party crisis descends from the party's loss of ideological specificity and virtue, some scholars have argued that these problems are due to the fact that highly ideological parties are unable to cope with the growing complexity of contemporary post-industrial societies. Others still have suggested that the party crisis mirrors the more general crisis of the parliamentary forms of government or of

¹The party crisis debate has occurred not only in the Western European context but also in the American context. Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba and John R. Petrocik in their *The Changing American Voter*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 47-73 showed the decline in the strength of party identification, which could be seen and conceived as a sign of party crisis. The decline in party votes has also been treated as a sign of the weakening of American parties, see Joseph Cooper, David W. Brady and Patricia A. Hurley, "The Electoral Basis of Party Voting: Patterns and Trends in the U.S. House of Representatives", in Louis Maisel and Joseph Cooper (eds.), *The Impact of the Electoral Process*, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1977; see also Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan. Party Government in the House*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993. More recent research has shown that the decline in party votes, and the weakening of partisanship were temporary phenomena, on the point see at least Joseph Cooper and Garry Young, "Partisanship, Bipartisanship, and Crosspartisanship in Congress Since the New Deal", in Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer (eds.), *Congress Reconsidered. Sixth Edition*, Washington D.C., CQ Press, 1997, pp. 246-273. See also Joseph Cooper, "The Twentieth-Century Congress", in Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer (eds.), *Congress Reconsidered. Seventh Edition*, Washington D.C., CQ Press, 2001, pp. 335-366. An interesting discussion of the U.S. party crisis literature can be found in John Aldrich, *Why Parties?: the origin and the transformation of political parties in America*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1995, pp. 14-18.

parliamentary democracy.²

While a large body of scholarly work stresses the fact that the party, as an institution, is in crisis, some party organization specialists (Katz, Richard and Peter Mair 1995) suggest instead that the crisis is circumscribed to the mass party organizational model, and that the departures from that model simply denotes the emergence of a new party organizational model (Ignazi, Piero 1995).

Regardless of whether there is a crisis of the party tout court, or whether the crisis concerns only a specific model of party organization, the implication is the same: parties are no longer able to perform their linkage function. When party organizations covered the national territory with their cells, branches, and sections, they were physically close to the citizens. That is, they have access to better know voters' views and demands and further to make political decisions based on the communication with voters. In other words, party organizations acted as the channel through which communication occurred.³

²The first point has been made by Paolo Armaroli, "Verso un partito leggero e intelligente", *Millennio*, 2, 1997, pp. 4-5; Augusto Barbera, "Ritorniamo all'Agorà", *Millennio*, 2, 1997, pp. 10-11; Marco Tarchi, "La politica dell' identità, crisi della democrazia e nuovi movimenti", *Trasgressioni*, anno 3, n. 1 (6), 1988, pp. 1-17. The second view has insistently been proposed by Gianfranco Miglio. On the crisis of the Italian parliamentary form of government, see Gianfranco Miglio, "Le contraddizioni interne del sistema parlamentare integrale", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. XIV, n. 1, 1984, pp. 209-222. A very similar point had already been made in 1957 by Giuseppe Maranini in his *Mito della Costituzione*, which is now republished as Giuseppe Maranini, *Mito della Costituzione*, Roma, Ideazione, 1996. On the relationship between the crisis of parliamentary systems and the crisis of parties, see Gianfranco Miglio, *La regolarità della Politica*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1988. The third point was made by Leonardo Morlino in his "Crisis of parties and change of party system in Italy", *Party Politics*, vol. 2, n. 1, (January) 1996, pp. 5-30.

³ Theory of communications (Jacobson, 1960) posits that communications requires the presence of specific elements. There must be a specific source from which the message originates, a receiver to which the message is addressed, a channel that allows the transmission of the message from the source to the receiver, a code that ensures that the receiver is able to interpret the message and understand what message the source intended to send, a message, and a context. This basic model of communication, developed by Jacobson (1960) can be applied to any form of communication, from traffic lights to political communication. In the case of political communication, when the communication occurs top-down, the government was the source, the citizens were the receiver, and parties were the channel. When the communication occurred bottom-up, citizens were the source, and government or party leadership were the receiver, and parties or

Parties' ability to communicate with their members and voters allowed the party to perform the paedagogical function of guiding voters; contributing in this way to the legitimization of policy proposals, policy decisions, government activity and, ultimately, of the government and the state.

In the midst of their existential crisis, parties are no longer able to adequately cover the national territory, they are no longer able to attract members, they have troubles in approaching voter needs and demands, and they have even more troubles in explaining what they do--in some instances, need to do--and why they do it. This is why in long-established democracies, growing segments of the electorate feel that parties are not in touch with society's demands, confidence in parties is low, and populism is on the rise (Pelizzo, Riccardo 2007).

The crisis of political parties is of paramount importance, not only because parties are very important democratic institutions, but also because the crisis of political parties may affect both the function and the legitimacy of parliaments. In fact, as parties become increasingly incompetent to perform the tasks that they once performed, the central party office is no longer able to control/influence party members in public office, and the party as an institution is no longer able to solve the coordination problems that may arise among MPs nominally affiliated with the same party--problems which may be detrimental to the effective functioning of the legislature.

The party crisis may also have an impact on the legitimacy of parliament for two reasons. The first is that by preventing parliaments from performing in an effective manner, party crisis deprives the legislature of its performance-based legitimacy. The second is that by failing to communicate and explain what parliament and parties in parliament do, it fails to secure the legitimacy of the parliament in the eyes of the public.

In order to compensate for parties' increasing inability to perform their linkage function, and to provide a communication channel between electors

rather party organizations were the channel. Hence, as political parties became increasingly unable to perform their linkage function, they progressively lost their ability to act as channels of communication, which eventually forced the political elite and the population to search for new channels of communication.

and the elected, the need, recognized by jurisdictions around the world, for better communications between parliaments and their electorates is increasing. Arising from this is a movement to create “e-Parliaments,” which the United Nations and Inter-Parliamentary Union have defined as legislatures that are “empowered to be more transparent, accessible and accountable through Information and Communication Technology” (ICT) (Kanthawongs, Penjira 2008). A 2006 report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reflected this growing awareness of the urgent need for parliaments to use e-technologies to become more responsive to contemporary society: *“If the actual aim is to enhance democracy and democratic values, Parliaments can take the lead by developing e-Parliament strategies that carefully consider concrete ways to interact and network with constituents, particularly young people.”* (Political Science Review 2011). In other words, the UNDP recognized that if the traditional channels of political communication were no longer adequately performing their tasks, parliaments and citizens had to find new channels of communication. The fact that ICTs provide a fast and economical communication channel has convinced international institutions, NGOs, practitioners, parliaments, parliamentarians, and parliamentary staff that ICT could be or become the new channel of communication.

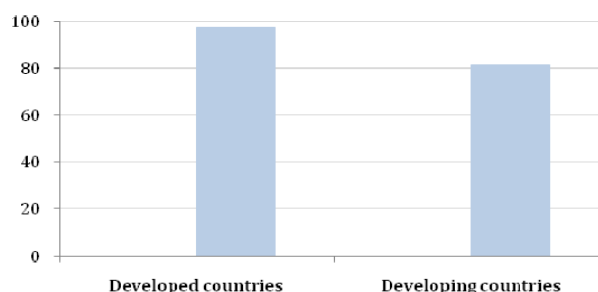
Section Two: ICT as the New Channel for Political Communication

The adoption of basic ICTs by parliaments has been fast and furious. More than 80% of parliaments worldwide have a website (FIGURE 1), and the Inter-Parliamentary Union reports that, in 2007, 91% of national parliaments of the European Union had a website (FIGURE 2) (Leston-Bandeira, Christina 2007). However, elsewhere in the world, the depth of resourcing ICTs for parliamentarians is highly variable.

Clearly, Internet connectivity depends largely on the availability of funds, while access depends on the availability of funds as well as the depth of institutional expertise and the technical skills of members of parliament.

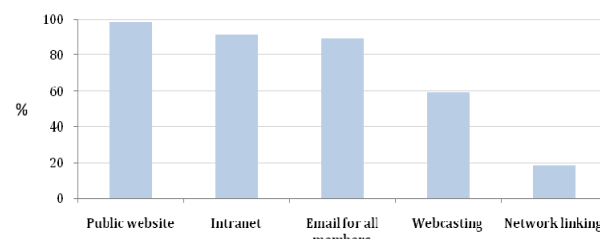
As Table 2 indicates, parliamentarians in Lebanon, India, and Mexico have high levels of Internet connectivity and access. In Lebanon, for example, all

members of parliament (MPs) have access to a PC and the Internet. In India, besides having enough Internet-connected PCs for all MPs, the Indian parliament also provides the 370 MPs in Lok Sabha with palmtops that have been inbuilt with mobile phones.



Source: IPU and NationMaster.com (1995)

FIGURE 1 PERCENTAGE OF PARLIAMENTS WITH WEBSITES



Data source: Coleman (2005), p. 276.

FIGURE 2 USE OF ICTS BY PARLIAMENTS OF MEMBER COUNTRIES OF THE EUROPEAN

In Benin, Egypt, and Mozambique, however, the situation is less favourable in terms of access, connectivity, and computer literacy. Only 5% to 15% of MPs in Mozambique and 5% to 12% of MPs in Egypt are computer literate. In addition, none of the 718 Egyptian parliamentarians receive a computer, while the country suffers the highest costs of the countries surveyed for Internet connectivity (Oleson, R. Zambrano and V. Zaaarello 2006). Clearly, constraints on access for ICTs can be problematic not only for the general population but also for elected representatives.

The fact that MPs have little or exclusive from computer literacy, to the point that they sometimes neglect their institutional emails, poses a serious obstacle to voters' ability to communicate with individual MPs. The second problem is represented by the fact that some parliamentary websites aren't inclusive of all MPs' email addresses of which the contact information is not accurate in the listed ones.

TABLE 2 ACCESS TO PCS WITH INTERNET CONNECTION BY MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT: SELECTED COUNTRIES, 2005

Country	No. of MPs / name of national legislatures	PCs available in parliament	PCs connected by LAN	PCs with Internet access	Monthly cost of Internet connection (US\$)
Bahrain	80 (Consultative Council: 40 House of Representatives: 40)		170	170	1,185
Benin	83 National Assembly	50	20	20	2,000
Chile	160 (Senate: 40 Congress: 120)	60 desktops and 60 laptops	120	120	1,000
Egypt	718 (Majlis al-Shaab: 454 Majlis al-Shura: 264)	350	350	350	10,000
India	750 (Lok Sabha: 545 Rajya Sabha: 245)	1,100	1,100	1,100	No cost (borne by the Government of India)
Lebanon	128 (one house: Lebanese Parliament)	200	200	194	No cost (paid by the University of Albany)
Mexico	628 (Senate: 128 House of Representatives: 500)	5500 (500 Senate, 5000 House of Representatives)	5500	5500	No cost (due to special package deal with service provider)
Mozambique	250 (Frelimo deputies: 129 Renamo deputies: 112)	130	0	6	400
Uganda	303 (86 elected by interest groups)	180	150	150	2,600

A third problem is that in some instances, the MPs don't use their institutional email addresses because they do not know that these email addresses exist, because they lack the computer literacy to use email and Internet services, or because they altogether lack access to computer technology. These three propositions were consistent with some of the empirical evidence we were able to collect in an online, cross-national survey on the sources of parliamentary information.

By surveying a small number of legislatures, we found that the parliamentary websites in Australia, Chile, and Italy provide the email addresses of all members. In Spain, France, Fiji, and India the respective percentages are 96.2, 95.3, 94.1 and 90.5. In Canada, the percentage is 81.3, and it is only 52.3 on the website of the EU. In other words, parliamentary websites do not always provide contact information for all members, which means that a sizeable portion of the MPs - from one in ten in India, to one in five in Canada, to one in two in the EUP- cannot be reached by email.

Furthermore, the fact that websites list members' email addresses does not always mean that the website provides the correct email address, and proper contact information. One of the most serious problems we encountered in the course of our empirical investigation, was that a considerable number of the emails we sent bounced back to us. There is, of course, some cross-country variation in the percentage of emails bounced back. Not one of the emails that were sent to the EU, the Australian, the Chilean, and the Spanish Parliament bounced back; one email (out of 630) bounced back in Italy, while the percentage of bounced-back emails is much higher in the other countries: which is 2.18 percent in France, 3.03 percent in Canada, 5.6 percent in India, 40.2 percent in the Fiji Islands, and 47.3 percent in Haiti.⁴

⁴ The Indian and the Canadian data reveal a significant variation in the percentage of emails that bounced back across the two chambers. In fact, in the Indian case, the percentage of emails that bounced back in the upper chamber was 15.1% (34 out of 224), whereas the percentage of emails that bounced back in the lower chamber was roughly 1.2 per cent. Similarly in the Canadian case, while no email sent to the members of the lower chamber bounced back, 19.2 per cent of the emails sent to Canadian Senators bounced back.

Also, there is some variation as to why our emails bounced back. While in the case of Haiti, the emails bounced back because the storage in the members' email had been exceeded, in all other instances, emails bounced back either because the email fails to work or because the email address listed on the Parliament's website was not correct.

The survey that we conducted across these legislatures also included the question on whether MPs thought that ICTs were the future of political communication, whether they used the email, whether they used the email for professional purposes, and whether they used email to stay in touch with their constituents.

On the question of whether ICTs represent the future of political communication, we found that an overwhelming majority of our respondents felt that this was true. However, our data revealed that Australian MPs, who spent more time surfing the Internet than anyone else in our sample, were the least inclined to think that email and Internet technologies were the future of political communications⁵. On the other hand, all the respondents from the European Union, South Africa, and Chile thought that the Internet is the future of political communication. This view was also held by 90 per cent of the Italian MPs, by less than 86 per cent of the French MPs, and by roughly 71 per cent of the Spanish MPs. In Australia, this view was held by only 53.6 per cent of MPs.

The responses are somewhat puzzling if they are viewed, not only in the light of the amount of time spent on the Internet but also in light of the accuracy, the precision, and the proper functioning of parliamentary websites and parliamentary email addresses. In fact, our data shows that the legislatures in which higher percentages of Parliamentarians believe that the future of political communication is on the Internet are the legislatures that generated a very low response rate to our survey, provided relatively few MP email addresses (EUP), or that provided inaccurate contact information (South Africa).

⁵ Parliamentarians reported surfing the net for about 3.5 hours in the European Union Parliament, for about 4 hours in Chile, for about 4.5 hours in Italy, for about 5 hours in Spain, for about 6 hours in South Africa, for about 6.5 hours in France, and for about 7.5 hours in Australia.

With regard to the use of the email, except for the Australian case, 87.5 per cent of the respondents from Canada, Chile, France, Italy, the European Union Parliament, South Africa, and Spain, were reported regularly using email.

With regard to the use of the Internet, the responses displayed greater variation. Only 33 per cent of Canadian MPs reported the regular use of the Internet, while 75 per cent of the EU and Chilean MPs reported to do so. The percentage of regular Internet users was 80 per cent for Italy, 87.5 per cent for Australia, and 100 per cent for France, Spain, and South Africa. Compared with the amount of time spent on the Internet, these above numbers are probably more telling of what MPs subjectively regard as regular use. In fact, while the percentage of Spanish MPs reporting a regular use of the Internet is higher than the percentage reported by Australian MPs who spent nearly 50 per cent more time on the Internet than their Spanish counterparts.

With regard to the use of the email for professional purposes, the data show that, except for Australia, where only 43 per cent of the MPs used email for professional purposes, the percentage of MPs doing so elsewhere was nearly universal. It is 93 per cent in France, 95 per cent in Italy, and 100 per cent in Chile, the European Union Parliament, South Africa, and Spain.

With regard to the use of email to connect with constituents, the survey data displayed much higher levels of variation. While only 31 per cent of the Australian MPs used email to keep in touch with their constituent, the percentage rises to 50 per cent in Chile, 60 per cent in the Republic of South Africa, 70 per cent in Italy, 71 per cent in Spain, 87 per cent in France, and 100 per cent in the European Union Parliament.

This evidence favors the claims that legislatures worldwide were quick in setting up institutional websites and email addresses, and that their motivation was to improve communications between citizens and parliament, however this strategic choice (the adoption of ICT as a new communication channel) has not resulted in expected successes.

While international organizations have remained fairly optimistic about the fact that ICTs will become a very important channel for political communication, they are also aware of the necessity to address some of the problems highlighted above.

Section Three: Problems and Proposed Solutions

To be effective, strategies to enhance and renew communications need to be based on a well-articulated and systematic plan.

A communications plan begins to explain its background and purpose, as well as articulate the institutional context in which the plan along with the main objectives is developed. Why are communications efforts being launched in the first place? What is the organization trying to communicate? Why is the formulation of a strategic plan necessary in meeting these objectives? It is important to articulate what the organization hopes to achieve in the short, medium, and long term through improved communications. Such goals could include increased awareness of a specific topic, increased voter participation, or increased feedback from the public.

A strategic plan must take into account the communications environment in which it will function, including current public issues that directly or indirectly affect the message. This understanding should be informed by findings in studies, reports, public opinion research, and focus-group testing, from both internal and external sources. Strategic considerations should also be made of the environment in which the communications plan will be launched. These considerations may include the history of the file, political relationships, relevant legislation or issues before government, and recent or planned announcements.

Crucial to the development of an effective communications plan are clear objectives,, and an awareness of the needs, expectations, and sensitivities of the target audiences. Key messages must be clear, concise, direct, and should be formulated with consideration made for synergies and potential partnerships. The communications plan should consider the range of new available media for enabling open dialogue, and should consider these in a dynamic, synergistic way. It is also important to develop a well-articulated approach to communications that is consistent with organizational values. For example, the language and vocabulary should have a citizen focus, and demonstrate a commitment to transparency and collaboration.

Naturally, a communications plan should be

supported by a realistic budget and, to ensure accountability, should specify benchmarks to measure progress and quality, and a method for evaluation. Finally, the plan should give thought to its own sustainability: How can the organization keep up momentum in implementing the plan? How can public engagement be ensured in the long term? Both the development and the implementation of a comprehensive communications plan require adequate institutional capacity, and relevant expertise.

Parliamentarians and their staff require not only an understanding on the societal contexts of communication modalities, but also a repertoire of skills in effective spoken, written, visual and interactive communication. They require these skills not only with respect to their own activities as elected representatives, but also with respect to institutional practices. That is, parliamentarians and their staff need to be familiar with the fundamentals of drafting a strategic communications plan that will help them to fulfill their responsibility to engage the public in the democratic process.

In order to develop such an understanding, parliamentarians and staff members may greatly benefit from proper training.

Conclusions

This paper argued that the growing crisis of political parties and party organizations has left parties less able to perform their traditional linkage function between citizens and the state. One of the most significant, and possibly understudied, consequences of parties' inability to perform this linkage function is that parties are no longer able to act as major channels for political communication. The recognition that political communication from the bottom-up, or from the top-down, is critical to parliament, and that political parties can no longer be effective channels for this communication has convinced political leaders, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff for the need of alternate means of interaction.

One can see this in the emergence, and the rapid diffusion of parliamentary websites. It testifies the fact that in ICTs, parliaments believe they have found the new channel for political communication. Though parliaments were fast and furious in their efforts to set up websites and email addresses, the adoption of ICT has not always provided a viable

channel for political and parliamentary communication. For instance, while parliamentary websites were set up with the intention of providing citizens with the email addresses and the contact information of parliamentarians, and were meant to enable citizens to communicate with their MPs, they often failed in these efforts. The failure could be attributed to two sources, one institutional, and the other behavioural. The institutional failure was represented by the fact that parliamentary websites, in some instances, did not provide contact information about all their members, or that they did not provide correct contact information. The behavioral failure was represented by the fact that MPs did not use their institutional email addresses for political/professional purposes, or that they did not use the email at all (possibly for lack of computer literacy).

While international organizations still believe in ICT's potential of becoming a viable channel for political and parliamentary communication, they are also aware of the shortcomings discussed in this paper. We recommend international organizations support the adoption of ICTs, and the supported technological modernization of parliament, through a broad strategic plan which--in addition to setting up goals, and outlining means of achieving said goals--should focus on providing parliamentarians and parliamentary staff with any amount of training they may require to become computer proficient.

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